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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5746
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6865
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5690
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1385
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 2249
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0497
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1392
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RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2334
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR PRIORITY 0964
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3690
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0939
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0423
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002321

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: OPPOSITION PRIMARY MAY PROVE UNNECESSARY

REF: CARACAS 02141

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Classified By: CHARGE' ROBERT DOWNES FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) Sumate's representatives have indicated publicly and privately that preparations for the opposition primaries scheduled for August 13 are on track, but may be scuttled if the leading opposition candidates are able to agree on a consensus candidate. Rumors, fueled by Zulia State Governor Manuel Rosales and Julio Borges' camps, focus on an agreement to be made public before the primary making Rosales the candidate. Teodoro Petkoff pulled out of the race in an August 4 press conference, but said he would support the opposition candidate. Borges' insistence that Rosales resign rather than temporarily separate from his governorship could, however, prevent consensus, making a primary necessary. Primary or no primary, Rosales is the front-runner for the candidacy. Once a main candidate is officially designated, the opposition's focus should switch back to seeking improvements in the electoral process. End Summary.

Primary Still On Track

¶2. (C) Poloffs talked August 2 to Sumate's Roberto Abdul about preparations for the August 13 primary to choose a single opposition candidate. Abdul said Sumate has raised all the money needed, staffed 85 percent of the polling centers, designed campaign ads, are printing ballots, and will send out voting materials soon. A simulation vote is scheduled for August 9. He said representation in Amazonas and Merida States would be low because would-be volunteers

have been threatened. As of August 3, eight candidates were registered to participate, including leading choices Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales and Julio Borges. Political outsider Benjamin Rausseo, commonly known by his comic stage name "El Conde de Guacharo" (The Count of Guacharo) is not participating, but campaign representatives told PolCouns July 31 that they are privately telling their supporters to write him in. (Although El Conde has subsequently said he would drop out if another candidate received more support.) Long-shot candidate Roberto Smith has also said he would not participate in the primaries, and would continue to run even if the three major candidates decided which of the three of them should run.

Decide Already!

13. (C) Although Sumate is ready, press reports and rumors, fueled by Rosales and Julio Borges' camps, suggest a tentative agreement will be announced before the primary making Rosales the candidate. A July 28 El Universal article announced that Rosales, Borges, and Teodoro Petkoff would soon receive the results of a poll they had contracted to determine the single opposition candidate. We understand the results show Rosales as the favorite. Petkoff subsequently withdrew from the race in an August 4 press conference, during which he pledged to support the opposition's candidate. Armando Briquett, a board member of Borges' Primero Justicia party, told poloff August 3 an agreement would likely be announced the week of August 7.

14. (C) Still, Borges' apparent insistence that Rosales resign his governorship rather than take a leave of absence as the Governor had originally planned may prevent a

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compromise, making the primary necessary. (Note: According to the Constitution, certain sitting government officials cannot run for another office while in their current job. The President and anyone running for re-election are generally exempt from this rule. On July 27, the Supreme Court upheld this provision, but it is still unclear if the law allows for a temporary leave of absence.) We have heard from several sources that Borges is concerned that if Rosales steps down temporarily the National Electoral Council or Supreme Court would annul his candidacy. Rosales, on the other hand, appears to believe this would not happen as President Chavez is concerned about running against a credible opponent to validate an electoral victory. Moreover, Rosales is the subject of several politically-inspired investigations and does not want to lose his immunity by stepping down. If there is consensus before August 13, Abdul said the primary may be turned into a show of public support for the candidate. Sumate leader Maria Corina Machado cast further doubt on the primary, assuming Rosales and Borges reach prior agreement, by noting publicly "There is no reason to have a primary without candidates."

Other Wrinkles

15. (C) Legal pressures against Sumate may also help determine the fate of the primary. The National Assembly has launched a special investigation, led by ruling coalition party leaders Jose Alborno (Patria Para Todos) and Ismael Garcia (Podemos), into Sumate's financing of the primary, which they erroneously charge is backed by U.S. funding (reftel). The hearings are aimed at discouraging voter turnout, as well as general support for Sumate. On August 1, Sumate leaders Alejandro Plaz and Machado were summoned to appear before the investigating committee, which then turned them away falsely claiming that the NGO's accountant had been summoned, not them. In addition, August 4 press reports indicate a lawyer filed a petition asking the Supreme Court

to disallow the primary on the grounds that Sumate was usurping the National Electoral Council's constitutional authority to oversee elections.

Comment

16. (C) Regardless of the selection method, Rosales is at this point the odds-on favorite to become the candidate of at least most of the opposition. Although as noted in septels, significant elements of the opposition, including senior leadership in Accion Democratica, are urging voters to boycott the December elections and therefore see no point to a primary. In addition, outsider El Conde de Guacharo is climbing, at least temporarily, in the polls and may throw off the opposition's planning. If a primary is held, Embassy officials plan to informally observe the vote. Once the opposition establishes consensus on a candidate, their next hurdle will be to obtain their most important electoral demand, the withdrawal of the fingerprint machines, as well as other improvements in the electoral system. Even if they are successful, the electoral deck will still be stacked heavily against anyone running against Chavez.

DOWNES